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Sexualized video games are not causing harm to male or female players, according to new research

by **Eric W. Dolan** — June 26, 2022 in **Mental Health**, **Social Psychology**

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Sexualization in video games does not appear to harm players, according to new research published in *Computers in Human Behavior*. The findings indicate that playing video games does not lead to misogynistic views or detrimental mental health outcomes.

Female characters are often attractive and scantily clad in video games (although there appears to be a decline in this trend over time). Some people have raised concerns that the sexualized portrayal of women has negative effects on players. But research on the topic has produced mixed results.

To better understand whether playing video games is associated with decreased player well-being or increased misogyny, the authors of the current research used a statistical technique known as a meta-analysis to systematically assess the results of previous research.

“I’ve been studying the effects of video games on players for two decades now, most of it on violence. I think most people have come to accept that there’s no relationship between violent video games and aggression or violent crime (despite some holdouts including the APA),” explained study author Christopher J. Ferguson, a professor of psychology at Stetson University.

“However, people still ask a lot of questions about sexualization and whether games either make male players more sexist toward women or whether women players experience more body dissatisfaction and other well-being concerns. It’s a much smaller research field than the violence field, so we hoped to bring some clarity to it.”

Ferguson and his research team conducted a meta-analysis of 18 relevant studies. All of the studies included a measure of exposure to general or sexualized video games. Fifteen of the studies measured aggression toward women or sexist attitudes, while 10 studies measured outcomes related to depression, body image, or

anxiety.

But the researchers failed to find a statistically significant link between videos games and either sexist attitudes or psychological well-being.

“Overall, the ‘moral panic’ over video games and sexualization is pretty much following the ‘paint-by-numbers’ pattern of the video game debate. Lots of hyperbole and moral outrage, but very little evidence that video games are causing any ‘harm’ to either male or female players,” Ferguson told PsyPost.

“As a purely ‘public health’ issue, this doesn’t appear to be much of a concern at all. That doesn’t mean people can’t advocate for better representations of females in games. They just need to be cautious not to make claims of ‘harm’ that can be easily debunked, thereby calling into question what might otherwise be reasonable advocacy goals.”

The researchers also assessed the quality of the studies, examining factors such as preregistration, standardized measures, independent ratings of video game content, and the use of control variables.

“The major caveat is simply that many of the studies just aren’t very good,” Ferguson said. “The good news is that the higher quality studies were less likely to find evidence for negative effects than lower quality studies. In some cases, scholars probably interjected their personal moral opinions into the studies, if unintentionally. Granted it’s still a fairly small research area, but this initial data has been so underwhelming that I’m not sure there’s much to be mined here.”

“Obviously, we go through these cycles of blaming media for social problems,” the researcher added. “At least with fictional media, the evidence often reveals that we’re probably scapegoating media and fiction rarely causes social problems. Again, to be fair, advocating for better representation of females in games can be a worthy cause even if the games don’t cause harmful effects. I support those efforts, just hope advocates don’t misrepresent the evidence as a part of their efforts (which, unfortunately, is all too common among advocacy groups).”

The study, “Does sexualization in video games cause harm in players? A meta-analytic examination“, was authored by Christopher J. Ferguson, James D. Sauer,

Aaron Drummond, Julia Kneer, and Emily Lowe-Calverley.

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